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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

April 4, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

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Subject: 583rd NSC Meeting, 1:00 pm, Wednesday, March 27, 1968

The President stated that he had asked General Abrams to join the meeting so that he and General Wheeler could report on the situation in Vietnam before the Council turned to the problem of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. He asked General Wheeler to summarize his report on his recent trip to Vietnam.

General Wheeler stated that the situation in Vietnam was very difficult to assess. The Vietnamese government had not been broken by the powerful VC/NVA attacks during the Tet offensive but had been "frozen" in a defensive posture. The reason for this was that the VC had established a stranglehold around the cities. General Westmoreland had told President Thieu that one could not afford to defend a city from the inside and had to go out after the enemy. Thieu, however, was hesitant to have his forces leave the cities since he felt the government simply could not afford another Tet offensive. However, Thieu was now beginning to push out again from the cities. For example, the current offensive around Saigon was not simply a US operation but was made up of 12 ARVN and 6 US battalions. Westmoreland told him that he believed the ARVN had in general performed well, had maintained high morale, and was now regaining the initiative. While he expected further hard fighting, Westmoreland had no fear of a general defeat. However, the enemy does have the capability of further local victories which can be blown up for propaganda purposes. Westmoreland estimates that the NVA can bring in two more divisions in the next 30 to 45 days and that there are now some 8,000 to 10,000 NVA troops coming down from North Vietnam. Khe Sanh appears to have served the NVA's purpose. Earlier there were two NVA divisions surrounding Khe Sanh with an additional division in reserve. Now one division has moved to the south and the reserve division has moved east. The enemy seems primarily interested now in Hue and Saigon, and Westmoreland believes that the enemy's near-term efforts will be to continue harassments and strangulation of these two cities. In conclusion, he stated that General Westmoreland had no concern that we would suffer a major defeat in South Vietnam.

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The President introduced General Abrams to the group and stated that he had been working closely with the ARVN for some time so that they will be in a better position to take care of themselves. He read excerpts from a memorandum from General Taylor commending General Abrams' excellent record as both a battlefield and staff officer. He then asked General Abrams to tell the group about the plans and problems of the ARVN, particularly with regard to the decision to draft 19- and 18-year-olds.

General Abrams stated that at General Westmoreland's request, he had been working for almost a year directly with the ARVN forces and had gotten to know most of the officers above the level of regimental commander and some of the regimental commanders as well. He felt that the ARVN, as well as the RF and PF, were continually gaining confidence in themselves. Some deficiencies had been revealed during the Tet offensive, but the general performance of the ARVN had been good -- exceeding the expectations of most Americans. The performance of only eight out of the 149 battalions was considered unsatisfactory. Thirty battalions distinguished themselves, and the remainder did very well. He noted that the first ARVN division took 10% casualties -- 30% in the rifle battalion -- but continued to fight. He recounted the story of an ARVN lieutenant who received a field promotion to captain as a result of his aggressive leadership in the recapture of Hue. An increase of 140,000 is now planned in the present ARVN force of around 600,000. They will now draft 19-year-olds and in June will begin the draft of 18-year-olds. He noted that the training centers were all back in operation but that the training job of this large increase is a major task which places a limit on how rapidly the forces can be expanded. He was confident, however, that the ARVN can achieve this force level objective. He reported that they are now trying to obtain from 4,000 to 6,000 additional officers and that a major source will be the commissioning of noncoms who distinguished themselves during the Tet offensive. With regard to new weapons, he noted that a major effort is being made to supply the ARVN with the M-16 rifle as quickly as possible. This program has been completed in I Corps and they are now moving ahead rapidly, particularly in the Highlands where the ARVN is fighting regular NVA units which have modern equipment. He noted the program to upgrade ARVN units with M-60 machine guns and grenade launches as well as a new mortar. There will be new equipment available by the time the 140,000 new recruits are trained. He reported that an effort must be made to also improve the RF and PF and that, pending availability of additional M-16 rifles, they would be supplied with M-2 automatic carbines as they were replaced in the regular ARVN forces with M-16 rifles.

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The President asked what the results of the Tet offensive had really been and what we could look forward to.

General Abrams stated that the Tet offensive had given a quantum jump to the improvement of the ARVN morale since the ARVN had met and beaten the best of the NVA forces. He observed that nothing you can do does more for a soldier's morale than to give them a victory. The morale of the ARVN is now at the highest point it has ever been. The morale of US soldiers has been good and continues to be so. He told a story of the Marine group on Hill 821 at Khe Sanh that ran up the flag every morning in a bugle ceremony in order to attract fire so that the enemy would use up its quota of shells against them for the day all at once. For the future, he expected more fighting in April. The enemy will apply all the pressure that he can.

The President asked whether he had enough troops for adequate protection.

General Abrams replied that, with the currently planned augmentation, he believed that the situation can be adequately handled.

The President thanked General Abrams and asked Amb. William Foster to discuss the status of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

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